

## 5 Can We Make Sense of Death and Suffering?<sup>1</sup>

“Where shall wisdom be found?” (Job 28:12). David Allan Hubbard, the distinguished former president of Fuller Theological Seminary, once gave a paper on Wisdom in the First Testament in which he summarized its diverse perspectives in these terms: “Proverbs seems to say, ‘These are the rules for life; try them and find that they will work.’ Job and Ecclesiastes say, ‘We did and they don’t.’”<sup>2</sup> I have often made the quotation the basis of an examination question that required students to discuss its truth and significance.

What Proverbs affirms, then, Job and Ecclesiastes agonize over. One should not draw the distinction too sharply: Proverbs does acknowledge the complexity of human experience even while looking for generalizations, and in different ways both Job and Ecclesiastes affirm Proverbs’ generalizations. But the mood is different. That of Proverbs is confidence; that of Job and Ecclesiastes is questioning. And the key expression of that questioning is their concern with death and with suffering, for these are two key human experiences that threaten to subvert the confidence of wisdom. If wisdom cannot embrace these realities, if it cannot speak to them, then it subverts its own capacity to speak to anything else. Death and suffering are universal human experiences of which wisdom must take account.

It is because the two books are preoccupied with these realities that they speak particularly effectively in our own context. There are some interesting overlaps between the way death and suffering feature in the First Testament and in the Western world. On one hand, we often note that the Western world avoids talk of death (belying what we say by the frequency with which we make the point). In an oddly parallel way the First Testament in general talks about death relatively little, though the reason may be different. But Ecclesiastes is the great exception, for here the reality of death stands on or between the lines of every page.

On the other hand, the Western world is very aware of suffering. It is one of *the* questions in the philosophy of religion, one of *the* questions that ordinary people raise in discussing the credibility of Christian faith, and one of *the* issues that sells books (“Why do bad things happen to good people?”). It is also one of the issues that run through the First Testament, whether in telling stories about it or showing how to pray in the midst of it or promising that God will do something about it or urging you to do what you can do to reduce it. It thus features throughout the First Testament; but Job is the First Testament’s great repository of reflective thought on the subject.

One of the striking features of the position of suffering in our world is that it seems if anything to be felt as more of a problem in our well-fed, well-doctored, and well-counseled societies than it is in societies where people have nothing. Among seminary students there is hardly an aspect of the First Testament that engages people more personally than the study of the Psalms of lament. They prize the discovery of the freedom such psalms

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<sup>1</sup> First published in Warren S. Brown (ed.), *Understanding Wisdom* (Philadelphia/London: Templeton Foundation, 2000), pp. 121-34.

<sup>2</sup> David Allan Hubbard, “The Wisdom Movement and Israel’s Covenant Faith,” *TynB*, 17 (1966): 3-34 (p. 6).

give them to voice their hurt and anger to God. Now these are a collection of bright and suntanned young people who enjoy the benefits of living in a country that has more of the world's resources than any other. Yet they are not happy. And what is true of them is true of the rest of our lonely, driven, anxious modern societies. To put it another way, they prove the truth expounded in Ecclesiastes, that it is possible to have everything, but to have nothing.

## Ecclesiastes

Ecclesiastes is a Greek word meaning "churchman" that attempts to provide an equivalent to the Hebrew title "Qohelet." The book itself goes through the motions of pretending to be written by King Solomon. I say "goes through the motions" because it never quite says that it represents the voice of Solomon (only the voice of an anonymous son of David), because it does not try to talk in Solomon's way (the Hebrew is the Hebrew of a much later period, as presumably author and audience would be able to tell, just as we know we do not speak Shakespeare's English), and because it drops its guard from time to time (for instance, talking about relating to kings in a way that Solomon presumably would not). What it does is invite its audience to an act of imagination, to picture Solomon speaking in its own day – Solomon who is the great First Testament symbol of wisdom as Moses is the symbol of Torah and David is the symbol of Psalmody.

But Solomon is more than the great symbol of wisdom. He is the great temple-builder, the great achiever, the great politician, the great city-planner, the great activist, the great businessman, the great entertainer, and also the great womanizer. Indeed, he is the great Californian.

What happens when you look with the eyes of wisdom at these activities and achievements? They all look like "emptiness and a shepherding of wind" (e.g., Eccles 1:14; 2:11, 17, 26). "Emptiness" is *hebel*, literally a "breath": these things are as insubstantial and evanescent as a breath. Outside the wisdom books *hebel* came to be applied especially to aspects of other religions, which Israelites saw as particularly pointless and empty. Preeminent among these was the making of images, which could look very impressive but could never adequately represent any being who deserved to be called God. These were pointless and empty, but also deceptive and dangerous.

The notion of shepherding wind in turn suggests the attempt to capture something that cannot be captured (and may destroy you in the attempt). The striving for success, the drive to achieve, the addiction to activism, the quest for entertainment: they are all hollow (and dangerous).

In the end, the same judgment applies to wisdom itself. It is also ultimately pointless and empty. Ecclesiastes does not mean that wisdom is useless. It is *absolutely* useless, but it is *relatively* useful. Wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness (Eccles 2:13), which is a very marked degree of excelling, even an absolute one. Wisdom is important because it enables us to face the fact that success, achievement, activism, sex, and entertainment are ultimately futile. It enables us to face these facts and think about what we do with them and about what stance to take to life in the light of them. Yet wisdom is *absolutely* useless because it is itself relativized by the fact of

death, which comes to us all, we know not when (Eccles 2:14-15). Wisdom cannot give us any control over that.

I have noted the possibility that people in First Testament times generally avoided thinking about death the same way as we do. At one level they may have been more accepting of it than we are. They did not rail against death, at least not when it came at the end of your three score years and ten. They recognized that death then is the natural end to life. Life is like a symphony or a song or a film: it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. By its nature it does not go on for ever. The time comes when you go to be with your ancestors. People accepted this. Yet they did not talk about it a great deal.

Ecclesiastes attempts to force them to talk about death, because it reckons that the fact of death makes a radical difference to the way we need to look at life. There are, no doubt, psychologists who would say that the relentless commitment to activism, achievement, sex, entertainment, and success, which characterizes our own culture and the one Ecclesiastes contemplates, is but a relentless striving to avoid the fact that we are going to die, and/or a striving to find ways of living on. Ecclesiastes does not offer such a diagnosis, though its analysis is compatible with that depiction. It concerns itself with getting people to face the facts about the future and then to live in the present in the light of these facts.

In the Middle East, people knew as we do that dying does not mean you cease to exist. They could see the body of a dead person, and they knew that the body represented at least fifty percent of the person, so the person has not ceased to exist. Its problem is that there is no longer any life in it. It cannot move, or act, or speak, or worship, because these are all activities that involve the body. The person still exists, but in an inert state. This inert person then goes to join other inert persons in a family burial place or a community burial place. People depart to be with their ancestors in a quite literal sense. They transfer from one community to another, from a living community to a dead one.

Israel portrayed what happens to the invisible person, the personality, the self, the "soul," in an analogous way. I imagine that they reasoned by analogy from what they could see to what they could not see. The self, like the body, does not cease to exist, but it becomes lifeless. It, too, moves from a living community to a dead community, called Sheol, the Hebrew equivalent of Hades. This is not a place of punishment or suffering, except in the sense of being a place of loss. It is a place of negation.

Ecclesiastes gives a particularly systematic account of this. Its most concentrated collection of negations comes in chapter 9. Death is indiscriminate (it points out): it comes to the just and the unjust, the good and the bad, the clean and the polluted, the religious and the irreligious, the honest and the dishonest. It constitutes a great contrast with life. Everyone rushes madly around the freeways of life, says Ecclesiastes, till the earthquake finally happens and they have driven off the freeway edge. Death is the place where there is no hope: "a living dog is better than a dead lion," says Ecclesiastes in one of its more memorable aphorisms (Eccles 9:4). Death is the place where there is no knowledge: there sounds a threat for a sage, a philosopher, a theologian. The living know at least that they will die; the dead know nothing. The living enjoy rewards for what they do, not least

other people's recognition. The dead become the forgotten. "Both their love and their hate and their passion have already perished; they will never again have a share in anything that happens under the sun" (Eccles 9:6). "There is no action or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, where you are going" (Eccles 9:10).

When the New Testament documents were written, some centuries after Ecclesiastes, the facts about death were again looked in the face, but in the context of something else having happened. They were written in light of Jesus' having come back from the dead, not merely resuscitated but risen to a transformed, heavenly kind of life, which gives empirical evidence for the possibility of such a transformation after death. The First Testament is itself resolutely empirical. It knows that in its day there is no evidence of life after death, apart from that feeble existence in the grave. It is not the case that human thinking or divine revelation has not yet progressed as far as envisaging life after death. The Egyptians knew the idea well enough; that is the reason for the pyramids. But Israelite faith is resolutely life-affirming and empirical; it does not go in for religion as the opiate of the people. Only at one point does its resolve seriously falter, in a vision in Dan 12. There it finally gives in to the theological pressure of the fact that people often cannot enjoy their three score years and ten, and it imagines some of them brought back to life to do that. But in general the First Testament sticks resolutely by the empirical convictions that Ecclesiastes propounds most directly.

Just before the end of the book Ecclesiastes offers an unexpectedly poetic picture of death's reality. Death is the moment when "the silver cord snaps, and the golden bowl shatters, and the pitcher breaks at the fountain, and the wheel shatters at the cistern, and the dirt returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Eccles 12:6-7). The description leads into the book's conclusion, which was also its starting-point: "Utter emptiness.... All is emptiness" (Eccles 12:8; cf. 1:2).

So what are we supposed to do? Or rather, how does wisdom help us look at life in the face of death? Ecclesiastes' most significant suggestion is that we need to see life as God-given. It repeats this observation several times. It appears in that poetic picture of death, for this is the moment when our life returns to the one who "gave it" (Eccles 12:7). "Here is what I myself have seen to be good," Ecclesiastes says (the perspective is indeed empiricist): "eating and drinking and seeing what is good in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of the life God gives one .... All those to whom God has given wealth and possessions and whom he permits to enjoy them, and to accept their lot and rejoice in their toil: this is the gift of God. For they will not think much about the days of their lives, because God occupies them with the rejoicing of their hearts" (Eccles 5:18-20 [17-19]).

To Western intellectuals this may not seem empiricist because it assumes that God is part of the reality in light of which we seek to make sense of life. That has, of course, been the assumption of most cultures; we ourselves happen to belong to a strange blip in the history of civilization, which came to believe that one needs to prove the existence of God, though usually it is oddly content not to have to prove one's own existence or to prove the reality of other elusive realities such as love or justice.

Ecclesiastes assumes that God is part of the picture. It then reminds us that the experience of anything depends on the stance you take in relation to it, on how you look at it.

In our house we have a number of things that are simultaneously worthless and precious. They are worthless in the sense that they will cause no stir on the "Antiques Roadshow" when our effects are disposed of, but they are precious because they were given to us by people who loved us. Ecclesiastes' wisdom then is, "The relentless pursuit of success, fame, achievement, pleasure, or amusement is folly. So is the relentless pursuit of wisdom, if you think it will give you ultimate answers or tell you the meaning of life. Death relativizes all that, either at your three score years and ten, or earlier if you fail to live that long. Instead, accept the life, the happiness, the fame, the success, the achievements, and the pleasures that come, accept and treasure these as God's gifts. And stop hurtling up and down the freeway and in and out of the transit lounges." It is an important piece of wisdom for the seminary and the church, and for the university and the world if we could only embody it.

Death is the touchstone of our attitude to life. People who are afraid of death are afraid of life. It is impossible not to be afraid of life with all its complexity and dangers if one is afraid of death. This means that to solve the problem of death is not a luxury. If we are afraid of death we will never be prepared to take ultimate risks; we will spend our life in a cowardly, careful and timid manner. It is only if we can face death, make sense of it, determine its place and our place in regard to it, that we will be able to live in a fearless way and to the fullness of our ability. Too often we wait until the end of our life to face death, whereas we would have lived quite differently if only we had faced death at the outset.

Most of the time we live as though we were writing a draft for the life which we will live later. We live, not in a definitive way, but provisionally, as though preparing for the day when we really will begin to live. We are like people who write a rough draft with the intention of making a fair copy later. But the final version never gets written. Death comes before we have had the time or even generated the desire to make a definitive formulation.

The injunction "be mindful of death" is not a call to live with a sense of terror in the constant awareness that death is to overtake us. It means rather: "Be aware of the fact that what you are saying now, doing now, hearing, enduring or receiving now may be the last event or experience of your present life." In which case it must be a crowning, not a defeat; a summit, not a trough. If only we realized whenever confronted with a person that this might be the last moment either of his life or of ours, we would be much more intense, much more attentive to the words we speak and the things we do.

Only awareness of death will give life this immediacy and depth, will bring life to life, will make it so intense that its totality is

summed up in the present moment. All life is at every moment an ultimate act.<sup>3</sup>

## Job

In this paper I deliberately deal with death and suffering in the opposite order to the one we are used to; we naturally think in terms of suffering and death, aware that the former may lead to the latter. Ecclesiastes and Job remind us that they are separate subjects. Ecclesiastes presses the question of death on us, for the most part independently of the question of suffering. Job presses the question of suffering, independently of the question of death.

Job tells the story of a man whose life falls apart as a result of the ancient equivalent to a visit to the physician that leads to your being told you have cancer or AIDS. Job is a man of faith and commitment to the community, so his experience more than anyone's raises the question whether there is any link between one's relationship with God and one's health and happiness. The book comprises a discussion of possible understandings of the nature of that link, a discussion that takes the form of a drama.

The *LA Weekly* commented on the Merchant-Ivory movie *A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries* that "one senses James Ivory's heartfelt attachment to his characters, but the question that hangs over the movie is, What's the question?" There is no doubt that there is a question in the book of Job, indeed several. What are we to make of the way calamity can destroy a life? What does it say about the nature of our relationship with God? How are we supposed to handle the experience, and help someone else handle it?

*A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries* is apparently an "autobiographical novel"; perhaps its problem is then that it is more autobiography than novel, and that facts get in the way of there being a "question." Fiction is so much easier a medium with which to handle a question, unconstrained by facts. Perhaps that is why God inspired so many wonderful fictional stories in the Bible: Ruth, Esther, Jonah, Jesus' parables; and Job. I guess that like many pieces of historical fiction, Job is quite likely based on something that actually happened, but this has become the vehicle for a work of the theological imagination in which a dramatist walks round a "question" and analyzes it from various angles and has the characters embody a variety of stances to it. The book notes that suffering is something that tests us, for instance; it reveals who we are as maybe nothing else does. The book invites us to let suffering contribute to our formation as people. It implies that we must face the possibility that our suffering issues from our own acts, though it also urges us not to be pressured into assuming that this must be so.

The bulk of the book is a dialogue between Job and three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. But "dialogue" is for more than one reason quite the wrong word. Argument, quarrel, confrontation, dispute,

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<sup>3</sup> Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh (Anthony Bloom), "Preparation for Death," in George Every and others (ed.), *Seasons of the Spirit* (London: SPCK, 1984), p. 42; reprinted from *Sobornost* 1/2 (1979).

altercation, or struggle might be better ones. It is also not a dialogue because that implies that people respond to each other, the way they do in a tennis match. Job and his friends resemble tennis players serving a continuous stream of balls, which their opponents decline to return, except sometimes in the next rally but one, or tennis players serving on two different courts (though perhaps in the end they are both serving on the same side of the net).

This is so because Job's experience, or rather – as his friends see it – Job's interpretation of his experience, his willful resistance to facing the implications of his experience, scandalizes his friends. They represent a hard-line version of the belief that what happens to us is the fruit of our own acts, that you make your own good luck, that anyone can succeed if they work hard, if they follow the right rules, if they live by wisdom. "These are the rules for life; try them, and you will find that they work." Job has tried them, has believed them, has proved them for some years, but then has found that they fail to work. The rules say, "If you live a holy and just life you will find that your life works out well." As a prophet has God once putting it to a failed priest, "Those who honor me, I will honor" (1 Sam 2:30). On Job's account of his experience, this is not true. It may often be true, but it is not always true, and therefore perhaps it ceases to be true at all.

In claiming this, Job is an affront to his friends' world, to the basis upon which they live their own lives. By implication, there is nothing about their devotion to God or their lives that makes them inferior to Job; they are also committed to God and committed to justice. That is precisely the problem. They can see themselves mirrored in him. If what he says is true, their own world collapses.

It is an uncomfortable experience when your world collapses. A piece of current conventional wisdom says that we therefore do not let this happen until we have an alternative world to put in its place; we prefer an inadequate world to no world at all. So scientific hypotheses sometimes continue to reign long after they have ceased to be convincing, because there is nothing to put in their place. Job and his friends have nothing to put in the place of their old theory about how life works. Like them, Job might nevertheless have continued to hold to the old theory long after it had been discredited; people do sometimes deny the reality of what has happened to them in this way. But Job does not. And his friends cannot handle it.

Perhaps one reason why Job can handle it is that he spends as much of his time confronting God with his questions as he does confronting his friends. Like the 1990s tennis player, John McEnroe, he serves at the referee and not merely across the net. One of the possibilities I suggest to students for their papers is that they write a letter to God about the issues the course has raised for them, and one of the freedoms this gives them is that they do not have to have the answers to all the questions they raise. That is the nature of asking questions. Life's worthwhile questions tend not to have answers, otherwise they would not be worthwhile questions. If I can persuade students of this, I may be able to reconcile them to the fact that seminary turns out to be a place that adds to their questions at least as much as answering them.

There is a psalm that paradoxically begins "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps 22). How can you ask a question like that if you

believe the person to whom you are addressing the question has gone? Yet somehow the process works, not merely because the enterprise the psalmist or Job is involved in is mostly one whose point is to get things off their chest, but because it presupposes that there must be more to the situation than meets the eye. It presupposes the reality of God and the faithfulness of God, and in Job's case the conviction that God is a moral God and that this is a moral world, even when the experience of the person praying is that this is not so.

I have hinted that Job's story implicitly suggests how we may handle the experience of our lives falling apart, and how we may help someone else handle it (or rather, mostly, it suggests how not to help them, except perhaps for the week at the beginning when the friends simply sit silent with Job, until they are unable to cope with his questions). One of the book's chief contributions to what we call the problem of suffering is to invite us into an extraordinary freedom to say the most outrageous things to God in the midst of suffering. Pain is allowed to talk; it does not have to come out indirectly in the way Job treats his wife. Job's solution to the problem of suffering is thus a practical one. The book no more claims to be able to solve the theoretical problem of suffering or the problem of evil than Ecclesiastes does.

It witnesses to this in at least three ways. First and most explicitly, when God appears to Job at the climax of the book, it is essentially to say "I'm not going to tell you the answer." Again, I sometimes have the impression that students think that I know more answers to the tricky theological questions than is the case. U.S. students love to call their teachers "Professor" and "Doctor" and perhaps their teachers like this, too. In Britain I was just "John," and that is a parable of the fact that before life's big unanswerable questions the ground is level. Job no more knows the answer to the question about suffering than his friends do; and the author of the Book of Job no more knows the answer than Job does. Perhaps God knows the answer, but if so, God is not letting on.

What God does do in an extraordinary speech at the climax of the book is rub Job's nose in two points. First, the world is much bigger than Job and he has to accept his place as rather a small cog in a big wheel. He has been talking as if the world revolved around him and as if it could therefore be arranged to make sure that his needs are met. It does not and will not. God's second point is that if Job is capable of doing a better job of running the world than God is doing, he is welcome to have a go, but he had better look first at the dimensions of the task (and incidentally at the evidence that God does not do so feeble a job of it). With delicious irony, God then goes on to tell Job's friends what a great person Job is for the way he has been "telling the truth" about God in all those protests and questions, as they have not when they have been parroting their theological orthodoxies (Job 42:8). The freedom to say the most outrageous things to God is affirmed.

Such, I think, are implications of God's speech. But when we study Job in courses, I regularly get students to take part in a dramatized reading of the book, and whenever I myself take part in this reading, I feel like tearing up my lecture notes, as I imagine a teacher of English must do after taking students to a Shakespearean play. My one-sentence summaries of



the points made in the book's various sections now seem so trivial. Indeed, I now realize, instead of talking about Job and Ecclesiastes, I should just have been getting you, my reader, to read them. You might think about doing so.

The second way the book witnesses to its inability to solve its problem is that God's refusal to tell Job the answer has as a paradoxical part of its background the fact that there actually is an answer to the question why calamity came to Job, but Job is never told it.

The book opens with a scene in heaven, a meeting of the presidential cabinet. God comments on what a great person Job is, but one of God's presidential aides whose task is to sniff out people who might be other than what they seem suggests that Job's piety may be only a front. Perhaps Job is only religious because it pays. God doubts whether this is so; we usually reckon that we can tell if our best friends are the real thing. But God cannot actually prove it. So God agrees that this accuser can put some screws on Job to see whether it is so. And the entire story develops from there. There is a perfectly good reason for Job's suffering: it is designed to vindicate the seriousness of his commitment to God.

Now you may think that this is far from being a perfectly good reason for Job's children to be killed and Job's wife to be put on the rack, let alone for Job to go through what he does. When Job pressed to be told the reason for what had happened to him and his family, let us suppose that God had simply appeared and told Job the answer to this question. I do not imagine he would simply have responded "Oh, well, that's okay then." The explanation would only have provoked more questions, as it does for us. But at this point there may be consolation in the fact that this is after all a piece of fiction, particularly in the opening chapters. (Even if the rest of the story issued from something the author had witnessed, the opening did not.) The point about the beginning of the story is to illustrate the *possibility* of a logic behind calamity. It sets the scene for what follows by establishing the fact that there *is* an answer to Job's question "Why in hell are you making me go through all this?" There is an answer that is at least logical even if it raises some other problems.

The point still is, Job is never given this answer. That means he has to go through his experience of calamity the same way as everyone else does. The introduction illustrates the possibility of imagining reasons for one's suffering but still leaves us having to go through it without knowing what the reason is.

A third way the book witnesses to its inability to solve its problem is the fact that after God appears and confronts Job, Job's life is restored to what it had been before, and everyone lives happily ever after. The story thus reasserts the truth of the assumptions about the question that much of the book is devoted to denying. It affirms that Proverbs is right. The book starts from the wisdom conviction with which we all approach life, the conviction that ultimately life is fair. It is the conviction that we all want to be true even though we recognize the evidence to the contrary. The book makes us look in the eye the fact that life is not fair. But then, lo and behold, in the last scene it turns topsy-turvy and says "Well, it is really." The man of that supreme commitment to God and to other human beings is fine in the end. This is so because in the end, perhaps the End with a big E, this conviction must be true, otherwise we could not live with the

consequences. If life is random, if there is no cosmic morality, how could we live at all? What would life mean? Job declares that we must not view our experience of suffering as the end of the story.

Israelite faith worked by betting on the conviction that in the end there is cosmic morality. This was not merely a matter of whistling in the dark. Israelites knew that they had empirical evidence for their conviction. It is empirical evidence analogous to that empirical evidence that would give some later Israelites such as Paul grounds for their conviction that death is not the end. It is not empirical evidence of the scientifically repeatable kind, but of the historical kind.

Israelites knew that their own lives stemmed from an extraordinary act of their God. They had immigrated into Egypt and become a privileged minority group as Europeans did in Africa, but they had lost their privileged position and become more like African Americans in the south two centuries ago. Then their God intervened and forced the imperial authorities to let them leave so as to start a new life with this God somewhere else.

Israelites took this experience as a key to understanding the world and life and God. They bet on the conviction that this experience showed that this is a moral universe. And they looked at creation and saw evidence of the same dynamic. They saw that creation evidenced the restraining hand of God holding back the terrifying forces that might overwhelm us. And it is on this basis, the evidence of God's activity in creation, that Job argues. God's speech points to that arena. Indeed, these books, which the world of scholarship calls the Wisdom Books, do not refer to the exodus at all.

Admittedly it may be that by being books about "Yhwh," the God revealed to Israel in Egypt, they do presuppose that other arena. Certainly they are set in its context by virtue of being within the scriptures that tell of that deliverance from Egypt near their beginning. Perhaps Job itself also implies it in the way it handles that question with which I began. "Where shall wisdom be found?" it asks in a poem that follows on the argument between Job and his three friends (28:12). By human endeavor you can find many things, it says, but you can never find wisdom. To use Ecclesiastes' terms, the quest is futile. There are no answers. The only person who knows the way to wisdom is God. And God is not giving you wisdom in the form of answers to your philosophical questions; they will remain questions.

On the other hand, "reverence for the Lord, that is wisdom; turning from evil, that is understanding" (28:28). Since the time when the First Testament was translated into Greek, that statement has been rendered as if it meant that "the fear of the Lord" is wisdom. Recent English translations recognize that this gives a false impression of the significance of the Hebrew word. It can mean fear, but it also covers awe and worship, and the First Testament does not regularly assume that God is someone to be afraid of. So there is no basis for introducing the idea here. "Reverence for the Lord, that is wisdom."